



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYERA • וַיֵּרָא

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

To Bless the Space Between Us

● This summary is adapted from this week's main Covenant & Conversation essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/to-bless-the-space-between-us/>

In this week's parsha, we learn why God chose Avraham: "I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." Avraham was chosen in order to be a father. In fact, Avraham's original name, Avram, means "mighty father," and his enlarged name, Avraham, means "father of many nations."

Similarly, the very first person in history to be given a proper name was Chava – Eve – because Adam realised that "she is the mother of all life." (Ber. 3:20)

This focus on parenthood is absolutely central to Jewish spirituality. We are taught that God loves us and cares for us like a parent who loves and cares for a child. It should therefore be obvious that our relationship with God is deeply connected to our relationship with our parents, and if we become parents ourselves, our understanding of God is deepened.

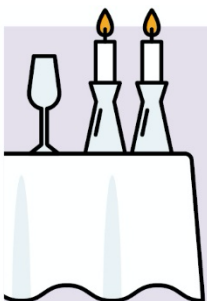
All of this makes the story of Avraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that Avraham was the son told by God to leave his father, and the second is that Avraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son. How can this make sense? It is hard enough to understand God commanding these things of anyone, let alone Avraham, the person He chose specifically to become a role model of the parent-child, father-son relationship.

The answer is, the Torah is teaching us something fundamental and counterintuitive. *There must be separation before there can be connection. We have to have the space to become ourselves if we are to be good children to our parents, and we have to allow children the space to be themselves if we are to be good parents.* Avraham had to separate himself from his father before he, and we, could understand how much he owed his father. He had to separate from his son so that Yitzchak could be Yitzchak (and not simply a clone of Avraham).

First separate, then join. First individuate, then relate. That is one of the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality. We are not God. God is not us. The clear boundaries between Heaven and Earth are what allow us to have a healthy relationship with God. What is so striking about the heroes and heroines of the Tanach is that when they speak to God, they remain themselves. God does not try to overwhelm us. The Kabbalists call this principle "tzimtzum", God's self-limitation. **God makes space for us to be ourselves.**

God loves us as a parent loves a child – and a parent who truly loves their child makes space for the child to develop their own identity. It is the space we create for one another that allows love to be like sunlight to a flower, not like a tree to the plants that grow beneath. The role of love, human and Divine, is **"to bless the space between us."**¹

¹ This lovely phrase comes from the Irish poet John O'Donohue.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. How does God make space for us to be ourselves?
2. Do you think it is hard for parents to make space for children to be themselves? Why?
3. Does this approach prevent parents (and God!) from protecting their children from making mistakes? Do you think this is a good approach, or is it too risky?



Making Space

by Rabbi Joseph Dweck

I grew up in the States and moved to the UK about ten years ago. During my first years here in the UK I was honoured and privileged to have many opportunities to speak and mentor with Rabbi Lord Sacks zt”l. Every time I spoke with him, I invariably gained some insight or advice that I always hold with me. My learning from Rabbi Sacks did not just come from what he said, but also from what he did. I had the fortune of observing him in many different settings. Whether in synagogue, at community events, lectures, or even at 10 Downing Street, Rabbi Sacks commanded respect and attention by his very presence. And still, with his gravitas, he created space for the people around him. He was prominent but not overwhelming. He was recognised but he did not eclipse. He did not need to diminish himself in order to do it, he simply recognised what was special about others and held for them the space that they deserved. I personally felt this from him on various occasions.

As I read this week’s piece, I saw once again how Rabbi Sacks lived what he taught, and how he truly managed to embody some of Avraham Avinu’s greatest qualities. In this week’s essay, Rabbi Sacks explains that – in his greatness – Avraham lifted and highlighted others by making space for the unique differences and contributions that each and every person offered to the world.

● Rabbi Joseph Dweck is the Senior Rabbi of the S&P Sephardi Community of the United Kingdom.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Delving deeper into the thoughts shared by Rabbi Sacks on Vayera, Rabbi Dweck shares his reflections on the main piece of the week.

What do you see as the main message from ‘To Bless the Space Between Us’?

A challenge for us in life is to find our boundaries. When we have clarity on where our responsibility and control begins and ends, we live happier, healthier, more successful lives. When we fail in that and lose sight of proper personal boundaries, we suffer.

Which ideas will help you with your own self-development?

There is an important message here that I must always question what I can and can’t control in any given situation. And this takes life-long practice. One thing that I can never truly control is other people. I was reminded that what is truly in my hands to influence and control is myself and my actions, and I must work hard enough on that.

Which thought expressed in this week’s piece do you think is the most important message for the next generation?

I believe that the second part of Rabbi Sacks’ advice here is most important for young people. Today many of us are inspired and guided to individuate and find what is special about ourselves. But it cannot end there. Self-development and growth must always go hand-in-hand with service and contribution. Rabbi Hillel the Elder said it best: ‘If I am not for myself, who will be? But when I live [entirely] for myself, what am I?’



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: This week we have been examining how children be given the space to grow into individuals. In the Torah, which biblical figures do we see “grow”?

▲: The words “vayigdal” – and meaning “and they grew” – and “vayidlanu” – meaning “and they grew” are used in connection with Yitzchak (Bereishit 21:8); Yishmael (21:20); Ya’acov and Eisav (25:27); and Moshe (Shemot 2:10). Your family may have additional answers of people we see in the Torah growing and changing in different ways, such as through teshuvah.

● Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1500 Torah riddles, available worldwide on Amazon.